

What is 'Postmodernism'? : A Quarter of a Century After

AGNES HELLER*

Roughly twenty-five years ago 'postmodernism', together with its siblings poststructuralism and deconstruction, appeared on the stage of the Western world accompanied by battle drums and trumpets. The cultural elite – in countries where they still existed – had to take sides, for or against. Some of their partisans hailed them as the most up-to-date trend, some of their enemies abused them as conservative. Some sophisticated minds praised them as liberators who finally put an end to the iron-hand dictatorship of high modernism, whereas others bemoaned the unmistakable signs of cultural and artistic decay and of the commercialization of taste. Yet, although those belonging to either camp took a firm stand, when the simple philosophical question 'what is it?', notably 'what is postmodernism?' was raised, almost everyone gave a different answer. Yet the dispute, the waves of which calmed down a long time ago, went on stormily for a few years. As I see it now, it exhibited an interesting mélange of the language of high modernism and of the postmodern way of speaking in its several varieties. Postmodern theorists spoke the language

* A student of Georg Lukacs who was dismissed from her teaching positions several times as a political dissident under the former Communist regime before emigrating in the mid-seventies, Agnes Heller is currently the Hannah Arendt Professor of Philosophy at the New School, New York and a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. She is the author of over forty books, including most recently in English, *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature and Life* (2005), and over three hundred articles. This lecture was delivered on 17 July 2006 at the University of Sydney under the auspices of the Research Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences and the School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry.

of universalism, mobilizing its usual contrasts of the new fighting the old, of the innovative challenging the fossilized, the progressive pushing out the conservative. Yet postmodernism exhibited simultaneously a colorful heterogeneity, where everyone added a new colour to the palette, and everyone spoke about something else than the other.

Let me advance here one of my conclusions: the postmodern perspective can claim at least momentary victory simply on the ground that such and similar universalistic debates have since disappeared from the horizon of the secular cultural world. Sharp polemics may evolve around a single event or work, such as a happening, a building (or its architect), an exhibition or a museum, a novel, a composer, a performance. In such debates several perspectives can clash, whether the clashes be purely artistic or include also political or ethical elements. Yet the battle cries surrounding the controversies of the scene twenty-five years ago – ‘this cannot be done anymore, this is out of date, this is no art at all’ – one can hardly hear today. Instead of the old battle cries we practise more subdued ones such as ‘this is not good, it is unskilful, a failure, dangerous, boring, ridiculous’.

In 1982, in his at that time famous lecture, Lyotard made a good point when he attempted to formulate the difference between premodern and postmodern thinking about art in the following way: the premodern asked what beauty is, the postmodern asks what art is.¹ Today one can raise both questions, even though one does not need to raise either of them.

In his talk Lyotard was first and foremost to describe the concerned specificity of the postmodern way of creating and judging. Several things that he believed to be central issues in postmodern creations turned out to be marginal. Yet he put his finger on something important when he insisted that postmodern language, regard or perspective is a de-totalizing language, regard and perspective. True, Lyotard hailed the tendency of de-totalizing with extreme pathos and an ultimate universality claim. He said that we must declare war on the Whole, we should bear witness to non-representability, we ought to stand for difference, we ought to rescue the difference, rescue the ‘honour of the Name’. Humph! Perhaps it is not the

invisible Jewish God whose honour will be rescued in post-modern art. To this otherwise fine remark I would add only that, although the rejection of holism is, indeed, one of the outstanding features of the postmodern perspective, still, as it turned out, the presentation of the Whole remains one option among many options in postmodern arts. Postmodern art is like a household where one can make use of very different ingredients. Or, to speak philosophically, one might repeat with Leibniz that the best perspective is characterized by the greatest amount of heterogeneity in the smallest space.

Taking up one point stressed by Lyotard and neglecting all the others – whether I agree or disagree with them – I will speak only about the tendency towards de-totalizing from a postmodern perspective, yet without pathos or enthusiastic commitments. I will take up the issue in the following steps:

The de-totalizing of

1. the concept of history
2. the concept of truth
3. forms of life
4. the arts; and finally
5. I will speak briefly about the postmodern arrangement of museums.

Why I discuss de-totalizing in this exact sequence will be clear, I hope, at the end of my paper.

There is one single thought I need to advance: re-totalizing, among other aspects of today's fashionable fundamentalism, is but an answer to de-totalizing, the result, and seeming reversal, of the former. But the reversal is in one important sense only a seeming one, for this newly bred holism, more often than not, is re-totalizing a fragment.

1. The concept of history

One should begin the discussion with the de-totalizing of the modern understanding of history, since the decline of the grand narrative and the deconstruction of metaphysics have by now become a philosophical commonplace. It could be further said, perhaps, that the decline of grand narrative followed directly from the destruction

of metaphysics, since the grand narrative was the most significant attempt so far to modernize metaphysics while temporalizing it in the form of world history. In the grand debate twenty-five years ago this was not yet evident. The first 'postmoderns' spoke with gusto about the end of history and the dawn of 'post histoire'. This was often interpreted as a declaration of a new age: we left behind the modern age and we stepped into another, postmodern age. This idea, similar to the declaration by Lyotard mentioned above, was deeply rooted in the tradition of modernistic thinking which it was meant to overcome. For it is exactly in the spirit of the grand narrative that we have to step from an old epoch into a new one, and that we need also to be able to give a fairly precise account of the periods we left behind, as well as to describe somehow the specificity of the new one. This is not de-totalizing. We can speak of de-totalizing only when the conception of change in perspective is substituted for the conception of the change of periods. The grand narrative does not disappear because we stepped into a new period while overcoming modernity, but because we look at modernity from a different perspective. To paraphrase Hegel, it is not the case that we postmoderns finally succeeded in looking at history rationally and so it looks back at us also rationally, but because we look at history, or rather histories, differently, they look back at us differently. I could formulate the situation with a little simplification in the following way:

The postmodern interpretation of modernity has replaced the modernist interpretation of modernity; that is, we see ourselves differently from before. And since we look at modernity differently from before we see it differently, not only as far as its content but also as far as its structure is concerned. We do not see it anymore as a Whole where everything is quasi-organically related to everything else, nor as an epic poem, where the story ends with marriage or with death. Rather we see history as a mosaic that consists of heterogeneous pieces of colored glass, which mostly do not even fit together. Seen from this perspective, modernity cannot be regarded as a progressive or a regressive period of History; even if from one aspect one can see progress, from another aspect one sees regress and, from a third,

one sees both. Precisely because of the heterogeneity of the modern world there is place for action, decision, evaluation. Seen from the de-totalizing perspective of the postmodern, the modern world is fragile, and we know very little about its future. This is another reason to believe that action, decision, evaluation might make a difference. In my little, old-fashioned formulation, the postmodern perspective is the self-consciousness of modernity.

Yet when speaking of the postmodern perspective as the self-consciousness of modernity, I have not offered a definition of the 'postmodern'. (No more than my confession, that from this and this moment onwards I understand my own life differently, would serve as a definition of my life. The simile is not very much forced, since generations do not change their perspectives about their own life at any contingent moment.) The reversal or change of the gaze looking at modernity is not independent of historical events and especially not of historical traumas and the analytical work which has been performed on these traumas. The experience of Nazism, of Stalinism, of the work performed on those traumatic experiences, and even the movements of 1968 prompted the reversal of the regard. The gestation of a de-totalizing position was already noticeable in certain tendencies of the 1968 events. Later, the decomposition of the grand narrative was reinforced by the experience of increasing globalization, from two additional aspects: first, because spatiality begins to play as important a role as temporality in historical narratives, and time experience appears as space experience; second, because almost every people, group, ethnicity, religion, form of life, or culture seeks to establish its own identity/difference within a shared/modern culture. I have already mentioned that this identity-forming trend can also end up in totalizing and thus in fundamentalism, in its local and not its universalizing shape. Finally, I must add that, from a postmodern perspective, that perspective is itself regarded with irony and a grain of scepticism. One cannot declare confidently from a postmodern perspective that having overcome all errors we finally know well what modernity is.

2. The concept of truth

Twenty-five years ago and in the following decade the charge of having 'relativized' truth – or, rather, the concept of truth – was brought against the so-called postmodern thinkers, Foucault and Derrida included. The charge is sheer nonsense since one can speak of 'relative' only if one has already subscribed to an Absolute, for example to a Hegelian system. Yet the de-totalizing of the concept of truth questions the relative together with the absolute.

Needless to say, the tendency to de-totalize truth is not a recent development. It started in the Age of Enlightenment, when the authority of Reason was queried or at least kept within a boundary. After all, Absolute Truth/the certainty of Reason presupposes an Ultimate Authority which warrants it. God could no longer remain the absolute warranty, at least not in mainstream philosophical thinking. The grand narrative replaced God insofar as it presented the Absolute, Truth as the Certainty (in contrast to subjective, primitive certainties) as the result of historical development. Then, the holistic concept of Truth was replaced in the nineteenth century by the regional concept of truth, that of 'true knowledge' in something, of something. This new concept leaves behind the metaphysical claims, for it accepts as true only statements or theories which remain open to falsification. At the same time it preserves the legitimacy claim of the traditional concept of truth, given that science legitimates, authenticates the sole truth for the time being. Whatever is scientific, or claims to be scientific, is believed to be by definition true.

The postmodern perspective also pluralizes the scientific concept of true knowledge insofar as it de-totalizes it and treats it genealogically. Let me mention three, to my mind essential, steps in this direction. The first is the theory of paradigms as elaborated by Kuhn, which already introduced perspective change into the understanding of scientific theories and their truths. The second is Foucault's gambit, the substitution of the genealogical question 'How is truth produced?' for the traditional question 'What is truth?'. The third is deconstruction as practised by Derrida, who allows texts to elaborate a truth and then to erase it. In Derrida's mind all truth

claims are deconstructed, but the concepts of truth and of justice are not, because they cannot be, since they are deconstruction itself.

3. Forms of Life

Once upon a time there was a slogan: anything goes. This slogan tried to make the process of de-totalizing understandable and misunderstandable. Every story is a good one if we accept it, every theory or description is true if it is plausible and if we can do something with it, every painting, writing, piece of music qualifies as 'art' if we decide so. Everyone lives in a way she or he pleases. Interpreted in this way, post-modern equals negative liberty, this time not for single persons alone. Not just that I can do whatever pleases me but, in addition, I do not break or hurt any norm or rule and I will not be censored by anyone for living as I like. From this interpretation the enemies of the postmodern 'condition' drew the too-simplified conclusion that the so-called postmodern world would result in the dissolution of all social, moral and artistic norms and rules, leading to absolute nihilism while its friends were celebrating the end of terror, the long-awaited freedom, fantasy, wish-fulfilment and the satisfaction of desires.

A quarter of a century later one must admit that, at least where forms of life are concerned, many things go without being generally censored. This is true especially of the increasing plurality of sexual relations and preferences. Ways of life which were abhorred as unnatural, sheer madness, sinful on the one hand, or lionized as revolutionary on the other, are now taken for granted, a matter of routine. Homosexual marriage is a claim for adjustment.

Still, there is a tendency to the opposite, where fewer and fewer things 'are going'. One of the most telling examples is the narrowing of the career avenue. You can live as a lesbian, you can take seriously the beliefs of Christian Science, but if you want to develop any of your abilities and get a position you desire, you cannot do as you please; or else, since you must spend long years in schools, you need to earn several degrees. You can treat regulations and rules with irony, but is rational to abide by them. The constraints

are mobile, yet not always also elastic.

'Anything goes' thus sounds an empty slogan and perhaps the formula of a utopia – for some a negative, for others a positive one. In fact, many things one desired to do twenty-five years ago are routine nowadays, while many things one was then free to practise, and which promised some rewards, became a blind alley. Some things 'go', others do not.

And yet, one can also say that the slogan is not as empty as it sounds. 'Anything goes' does not necessarily mean that everyone can do what she or he desires and get away with it, but that everyone can choose a form of life and get away with it. There are constraints in every form of life, yet different constraints. I accept such and such constraints, for example, getting three degrees; another accepts other constraints, such as living in the countryside and doing occasional work. In a well known film one man chooses to submit to the constraints necessary to become a famous concert pianist, a second plays the piano in a country pub and lives in peace. Both, finally, enjoy what they are doing. The postmodern perspective allows the person who leads one way of life to understand the person who chooses an entirely different way, without attributing moral or social superiority. This is indeed possible, although not widely practised.

But is it 'obligatory' to withhold judgment, is it right to do so? The answer is easy in the case of talented pianists, but the alternatives are usually harder. After all, some may prefer a life on drugs, whereas others may choose a life at the psychological and financial expense of another human being, whom they keep on a short leash of emotional or sexual dependency. The moral question cannot be answered in its generality. If you were to ask me to judge, there would be cases where I would tell you 'live as you please, only do not pass judgment upon us, and above all, do not force us to do what we do not want to do' and there would be cases where I would cry out, with Voltaire, 'crush the infamous!'

The grand narratives – in both their 'progressive' and 'decadent' versions – identified Enlightenment and modernity. Philosophies of 'progress' promised that in modernity the project of the Enlightenment would carry – through conflicts – the final victory,

albeit it was for the time being still an unfinished project. Philosophers of decadence warned us that the destructive powers of Enlightenment, after having been set free in modernity, would increase their destructive power until the collapse of Western civilization. From a postmodern perspective modernity shows an altogether different picture. There are also among the confessed 'postmoderns' a few thinkers – for example Zygmund Bauman – who equate Enlightenment and modernity in its culture-critical version. For my part – joining many others – I do not share this vision. In my understanding Enlightenment and modernity, or Enlightenment and 'humanism', are far from identical. Totalitarian systems like Nazi Germany or the Stalinist Soviet Union were absolutely modern. Bauman would agree and add that Auschwitz and the Gulag were the descendants of Enlightenment. This conception could be accepted only if one held the belief that Romanticism is the only legitimate branch of the tree of Enlightenment. Yet, even if it is one of the branches, there are other branches of the same tree which mediate an entirely different message, as has been presented in Foucault's beautiful essay 'What is Enlightenment?'.² Nowadays one could also point at new historical phenomena such as religious fundamentalism which turns openly against Enlightenment, although it is modern beyond any doubt. To cut a long story short: the postmodern perspective is pluralistic, and there are as many theories as thinkers presenting them. Yet one can safely say that it inherited something from Romanticism and something else from Enlightenment proper: the sense of irony on the one hand, and the tendency towards scepticism on the other hand.

4. The arts

Roughly a quarter of a century ago the postmodern perspective occupied the stage as 'postmodernism', as a new tendency in the arts, in opposition to classical or 'high' modernism. People started to speak about postmodern style in contrast to 'modernist style' in architecture; and not without reason, given that Bauhaus on the

one hand, minimalism on the other, were regarded as the *dernier cri* in modernist architecture. There were buildings constructed in a 'postmodern', that is post-Bauhaus and post-minimalist, style. Museums, hotels and other public buildings wear on their very body the defunct styles they quote, among others the various forms of secession, or sometimes even the styles, of Italian Fascism. Architecture and sculpture begin to merge, unusual materials are used, fantasy is set free. Modernists cried wolf, and mobilized the faithful against commercial eclecticism and allegedly bad, barbaric taste, with very little success. Obviously so, for if we were just to imagine a whole city populated by minimalist buildings alone we would die of horror and boredom, even if we judged each and every building individually as 'sublime'. (One should not forget that according to both Adorno and Lyotard modernism embodies the sublime.)

The postmodern style in architecture immediately gathered a decent army of followers among sophisticated aesthetes, and thus the old story seemed to be reiterated: once again the new fighting the old. Not that the buildings were fighting but the ideas concerning building. This kind of battle belongs now to the past, because one can build in all 'styles', and moreover the style of each and every building becomes personal. The sole aesthetic criterion is that the building impress us as uniquely beautiful, that it be attractive, and – in Libeskind's formulation – tell its own story. As the Jewish Museum in Berlin, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao or the new building of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York verily do.

At the beginning, the true postmodern believers contrasted the freedom of postmodernist works and ideas with the terror of high modernism. It would be impossible to deny that there was such a terror – practised first and foremost by art critics, exhibition organizers, gallery owners, concert managers, aesthetes, and especially by the numerous declarations and manifestos issued regularly by the ideologues of modernist schools. Adorno banned from music the common chord, which allegedly represents reconciliation with an alienated world; in painting, figurative works – like those of Lucien Freud—were looked at by disapproving eyes; in literature, there was zero tolerance for a linear story or for identifiable characters. If

we have all those ideological restrictions in mind, postmodernism appears in fact as liberating – since it has not replaced ancient restrictions with new ones, but lifted all restrictions of a general kind. One can still believe with Nietzsche that it is easier or even more refined to dance in chains, but one can hardly say that the same chains are good for everyone.

One can ask, of course, where modernism ends and postmodernism begins, but it does not make much sense, since neither modernism ended nor postmodernism began at one point. Whatever specific differences one may attribute to postmodernism, none of them will be helpful. Let us say that postmodern art is playful, and prove it with the works of the recently deceased Niki de Saint-Phalle. Yet what about surrealism? Was it not playful enough? Or were the surrealists already ‘postmodern’ without knowing it? Let us say that installation is a postmodern genre. What about Duchamp or Yves Klein? Were they postmodern? And where does post-modernism begin, for example, in music, where the common chord is slipping back? In Messiaen, or perhaps in Part, or only in the postminimalist Glass? Yet from a postmodern perspective one does not usually ask such questions. One does not in fact attach importance either to the questions or to the answers, precisely because one does not think in terms of the grand narrative. Let me briefly enumerate three different, yet related, aspects of this kind of thinking.

First, the problematic of historicism in art. Nowadays, one’s appreciation of a work of art, be it a novel, a painting, a piece of music or a building, is not normally dependent on the historical moment or the geographic place of its creation. Cries of enthusiasm such as ‘Fantastic! Already in the fifteenth century! How much he advances his time!’; or deprecating remarks such as ‘In his time in Paris, they already painted in the impressionistic style, whereas he still ...’, are no more in vogue. When a modernist being guided round a wonderfully built, elegant and sophisticated medieval castle in Stockholm was informed that the castle was built in the nineteenth century, he immediately lost interest and stopped even looking at it. For an eye that looks at a building or any work from a postmodern perspective, the sense of beauty has nothing to do with dating and attribution.

(Certainly, monetary value has a lot to do with it, especially in the case of paintings.) The citizens of Budapest can nowadays freely enjoy the neo-gothic and eclectic Parliament building, whereas fifty years ago sophisticated citizens would have been ashamed to admit their love and appreciation. We all learned in the thirties that the beginning as well as the summit of modernist literature was Proust's novel and Joyce's *Ulysses*. Yet this historical pairing tells us very little today. For a contemporary reader *Ulysses* has far more to do with *Don Quijote* than with *Remembrance of Times Past*, while Proust's novel seems far more to do with Balzac or Stendhal than with Joyce's novel. And there are no few among us who admire one but not the other without shocking sophisticated readers. We are no more in duty bound to consider Aristophanes as the greatest comedy writer of them all because he was the first and he happened to be a Greek. From the postmodern perspective there are no sacred cows, nor are there untouchables. This is why the practice of iconoclasm is groundless. We turn towards certain artists or works of art, as we can also turn away from them, but without drama. Some cultural critics warn us that this is as much a loss as a gain. For if there is no more 'agon' in the world of arts, art works will lose their social significance. This may be true, but will not necessarily remain true. The new generation can read, look, listen, decide, appreciate, evaluate, in a far more personal way than has happened before. The question remains whether this practice turns judgments into subjective or contingent ones or whether it rather serves as a counterpoise to the tyranny of advertisements and the culture industry. It needs to be added that Harold Bloom was right: the postmodern way of reading and thinking has not destroyed the so called Western Canon, only opened it up.

The second most important feature of the postmodern way of thinking, to my mind, is de-totalizing the concept 'Art'. The concept 'Art' is in fact not very old, it is essentially modern. It counts as a commonplace in cultural history that it did not occur to anyone in the Middle Ages, for example, to encompass in one and the same concept such different things as sacred (church) music, marketplace comedy, lyric poetry or a castle. 'Art', encompassing all of these and more, is a universalistic concept and as such a product of the

Enlightenment. It made itself at home especially on the European Continent. The English language still distinguishes between art and literature even if the English art theorist does not.

The traditional universalistic concept 'Art' occupied a central role in the high modernist vision of the art world, not because the concept was taken for granted as it had been in the nineteenth century, but precisely because it was no longer taken for granted, because it became problematic. This was the reason for Lyotard's already mentioned dictum, that 'what is art?' became the decisive question of the modernist vision. It followed from this vision that all the main tendencies and schools of the modernist art world, such as impressionism, expressionism, symbolism, secession, surrealism, dadaism, constructivism, minimalism and so on, had to make their presence in all kinds of 'Art', at least in painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and all literary genres. Yet arts are different, genres within a kind of art are also different, and they resist vehemently being subjected to the same tendency or school. If the pressure of famous art critics is too overwhelming, artists cannot resist, or at least they try to write or paint or compose as far as possible according to the last ideologically underpinned mode. But though we try as hard as we can, there is no surrealist music nor surrealist architecture, and though minimalism was forced upon literature – not without success – it could boast only minor results compared with the essential ones in architecture or in music. The hidden or outspoken demand that the same tendencies should be presented in all kinds of arts and at the same time – this ideological terror has completely withered with the appearance of the postmodern. A video artist is not interested in what kinds of styles, if any, are preferred in literature. The moderns hailed the autonomy of art, the postmoderns the autonomy of every single work of art.

Let me turn to the third specificity of post-modern practice in arts and art theory.

It has been said and repeated for several years, sometimes with dismay, at other times with fervour, that there is no more *avant-garde*. As, naturally, there is no *arrière-garde* either. This development resembles very much the shift in the understanding of history. One can do everything that has been done in the past: figurative painting

is back, so are realism and naturalism, yet one can also paint in the abstract style, and minimalism has its fans. Palimpsests have become widespread. One can compose opera for the stage, symphony for an orchestra, electronic music, one can compose on a computer, and so on. In literature one can compose text, also minimalist texts, but the old kind of novel is also back with its stories and characters. The idea that the past is constantly in the present appears in the postmodern staging of traditional works, whether operas, comedies or tragedies. Everything is possible on the stage, fantasy flies free, here truly anything goes if it works.

Although there is no *avant-garde* in the sense that the new does not appear as the promise, as the redeeming 'yes', still there are new art-forms. Some among them revive old, long ago extinct genres. Once upon a time there was an art called 'living picture', and now it appears again. Silhouette or shadow-play as an art-form – mentioned also by Kant – is back. Video artists revive the wonderful and defunct style of silent movies; other video artists, such as Bill Viola, conjure up the spirit of Renaissance painting. The first photo artists of the nineteenth century presented their models frequently in period costumes. This kind of photography has been out of fashion for a long time, yet now we enjoy it again in the works of Cindy Sheerman and others. Blurring of the limits of various art-forms and genres, a tendency which was already there in high modernism, continues. In this manner, it is not the arts that have changed 'periods', but rather the perspectives from which we look at them, and the ideas, ideologies which surround them. This means – in this case – simply that a work of art will be neither better nor worse because it remains confined within the limits of one genre alone or because it merges two or three genres in one.

I would like to return briefly to one of my former, perhaps enigmatic, remarks: anything goes if it works. What does it mean, that a work of art 'works'? That it impresses us as being 'art'? That the listener or the viewer perceives it as such? There is no unanimous answer to this question as there was none to the question 'why is something seen or heard as beautiful?' This is, however, the slightest of all problems. One is not concerned because no unanimous answer

can be given to questions, 'what makes something beautiful?' or 'what makes this and this a work of art?' but because those questions are raised at all. Why do we consider those questions meaningful at all?

I will answer one of the questions tentatively. Why cannot we help asking whether this or that work is a work of art? The question includes the hidden agenda, the other question: what makes a work of art a work of art? Since this question is, contrary to the one concerning beauty, a modern one, the answer, if there is answer (not to the question itself but to the importance of the question), needs to be sought somewhere in the modern human condition.

The modern world is a functional one. Instead of asking questions concerning 'essences' we ask questions concerning functions. The question concerning art is raised because we attribute a specific function to works of art, and we want to know whether this or that painted thing, piece of music or work of literature does perform this function or not. To put it bluntly: in my view the function of works of art in modernity is to offer us sense, render meaning to life experiences, illuminate those experiences, very painful experiences included, make us think them over, and do all this in a sensually enjoyable way, giving us pleasure. Many experiences in life give us both pleasure and pain, and these experiences – first and foremost love – are the most significant ones. But mostly they do not provide us also with the meaning of those experiences, especially not of the painful ones. Many things and events give us only pleasure without pain, such as a nice dress, a good dinner, or an entertaining book, but we never expect them to live up to the function of sense-rendering, especially not in rendering sense to pain, trauma, grief. One can turn also to wisdom books or to philosophy, which may fulfil this function, yet they do it without offering sensual pleasure and joy.

The chief difference between art and entertainment is not that art is good and entertainment is bad. There is also bad art and good entertainment. The difference lies in their respective functions. From this it does not follow that good art cannot be entertaining, for it often is, and it does not follow either that works created for entertainment will never render meaning or sense to one's

experiences. We deal in both cases with illocutionary acts. Advertisements can also be well done, witty, even beautiful, yet they are perlocutionary acts. This is also true of political posters.

Bad art is the kind of art which does not perform its function, because of poor quality, well-meant dilettantism, lack of talent, being miscarried. It is a misunderstanding that since we do not expect art critics to promote one tendency in art over another, there is no task left for them. They are expected to give their expert opinion, which includes practised taste, as to whether a work is well done or is a failure, and, further, to put into the centre, to promote, the artists and the works of art which, in their mind, perform the function of rendering meaning on the highest level, and which simultaneously provide great satisfaction for our senses.

5. The postmodern arrangement of museums

One of the most popular slogans of modernist art theory sound ded 'demolish, raze down the museums!' Those museums suggest that the old masters were better than us. Some modernist music theorists declared the death of opera. It is a bourgeois genre, it must leave the stage! Modernist writers declared that the old ones were conservative fools. For example, Aragon organized a demonstration of *avant-garde* writers against Anatole France at his funeral. It is well known that political radicalism, both left and right radicalism, claimed a leading role in modernist movements.

The de-totalizing of the grand narrative resulted among other things in the disappearance of this kind of radicalism. One can abuse postmodernists as conservatives solely from the position of modernist radicalism. Postmodernists do not organize demonstrations at the funeral of somebody because they do not like his style, they do not boo authors just because they represent another trend. Theatre-lovers visit the kind of theatres which they can expect to stage plays to their taste. One may regret that there are no scandals. Yet where there is no scandal, there is no terror either.

In between several things happened to the museums.

One cannot expect anyone to speak about museums in general.

There are museums for everything almost everywhere. Museums are among the greatest tourist attractions. One can think randomly of Bilbao, Barcelona or of the so-called 'Museumviertel' in Vienna.

Among all the museums, the kind called Museum or Gallery of 'fine arts', the ones which exhibit works of art, of applied arts, or archeological finds, and incidentally products of other cultures which can be also looked upon as works of art, still occupy pride of place. Traditional museums collected works which have supposedly already proved their timeless value. This was true also in times of modernism. Those were the museums which modernists tried to demolish, at least in a spiritual sense.

Instead of the museums being crushed, the conception of the museum has changed in the last decades. The change took place roughly in three steps: first, the emergence of museums of contemporary arts; second, the re-arrangement of the tradition; third, the organization of concentration on single works of art which hold the possibility of anarchy. Since the traditional museums of fine arts allow for little re-arrangement – which is by no means a shortcoming – I can mention only a few new museums or some new wings of the old ones.

The most important innovation is the appearance of the museums of contemporary art. The concept of the museum and the concept of being contemporary seem to contradict one another, but only if we think of museums in the spirit of the grand narrative. Then only the dead masters can have a place in a museum. The task of the museum is to keep the dead alive, to show that there are dead who live forever, because they will never be forgotten. The traditional museum is the temple of memory. Whoever enters the gates of this temple will 'repeat', just as one repeats in the temple, the same liturgy, the same ceremony, about the same creed and the same story. On the contrary, the contemporary art museums collect the spirit of living artists. The conception does not include repetition. It can be presupposed that someone who enters this museum looks at a work for a first time even if she or he is eighty years old and a frequent visitor of galleries. It can be presupposed that no one could have seen this work before, because it has not yet existed. In a museum

of contemporary art the present undresses, shows itself, introduces itself. It raises a claim to the sense-rendering function of art even by presenting itself as senseless. But this remains the sole claim. The works presented in contemporary art museums do not raise necessarily and simultaneously a claim to 'eternal validity', not even to longevity; for example, an installation could hardly do so. Yet still, and in all cases, the regard the viewer casts at the object will be a 'yes vote' or a 'no vote'. I know that these few and vague sentences should have been followed up by detailed elaboration, but to continue this chain of thought would take us far away from the subject matter of this paper.

There is only one additional thing I want to stress. An important new conception is developing in the artistic arrangement of museums in general, and especially in the newly established museums. Attention is concentrated on single art objects. That is, the context loses significance, for it is presupposed that the single work is its own context. It is indifferent or it seems to be indifferent to which other objects are placed closest to it, before, beside or above it. Once upon a time modernist art theorists abused museums on the ground that they presented works out of context. We were advised that a Medieval altar belonged in a Medieval church; in the museum it was out of context and thus not really meaningful. Museums inspired by the ideas of high modernism tried to correct this fault. A typical example is the 'Cloisters' museum in New York, where whole churches were built inside the museum to let the spectator see the sacred images in their quasi-original context. All this is sheer romanticism. There are several conceptions of arranging museums in our age, given that the postmodern position does not exclude any approach if it 'goes'. Yet, as mentioned, one of the significant conceptions of arrangement is exactly context/indifference. This is how one can exhibit in the same room four paintings, some pieces of furniture, a hanging scroll and a sculpture, not created in the same period or the same place. This is indeed anarchy, but anarchy with this purpose: the spectator should concentrate on one object, independently of the other ones.

However, all this looks odd to an eye used only to the museum

arrangement of classical or high modernism. If we cast a glance, for example, at the aesthetic works of Hutcheson, we will see how in the eighteenth century he recommended exactly this principle to the wealthy nobility who aspired to populate their castles and their gardens with works of art and other things of beauty and good taste.

Yet there is still an institution which has mostly, albeit not everywhere or always, preserved the spirit of the grand narrative even after its demise. And this is a central institution of art: the traditional Gallery (or Museum) of Fine Arts. Museums or Galleries of Fine Arts generally embody the grand narrative at its classical best. This is so if they tell the whole story, as the Metropolitan Museum and the Louvre do; it is also the case if they present the spectator with one or other chapter or one single thread of the story, as the British Museum and the Kunsthistorisches Museum do.

All the museums or galleries of fine arts are in the last instance illustrations to Hegel's *Aesthetics*. We start the story somewhere in Egypt and in the region of the Tigris and Euphrates, then follow with the Greeks, the Romans, the Middle Ages. (At some point and somewhere one has to insert also the works from the Far East.) Then we turn to early modern art where we divide nations (in the case of Italian Renaissance, the cities) and follow the narrative within nations. There are galleries of English, German, French, Dutch art, yet within these and similar groupings the arrangement still needs to follow the historical sequence. It is not easy to satisfy both criteria (time and nation) yet they try hard. In the nineteenth century the styles also enter the stage in arranging European (and American) art, again in a quasi-historicist setting. There will be for example a cluster of French pre-impressionism, impressionism, post-impressionism, etc. Sometimes the outcome is funny. I have seen Kandinsky put in the cluster of 'German expressionism'. Surely, the 'ancient' can also be presented in a postmodernist manner, and there are already attempts at it, still very much resisted. Even such an innocent case as hanging one of the Monet water lily pictures in the vicinity of two contemporary works in the newly opened MoMA, met with an outcry from some art critics, although essentially the historicist arrangement

has been preserved obediently almost everywhere.

One can of course ask if only conservative habits resist innovations and the de-totalizing of traditional Art Galleries? Or is there, perhaps, an inherent value in looking at paintings, statues, and even furniture and things of use as 'embodied' history? Is the attraction of this arrangement an important and even warning sign? Do we still need the crutch of the grand narrative? Or, let me reformulate the last question; do we need a place in the world of art where the grand narrative can still feel at home?

At an earlier point I came up with the idea that de-totalizing has its limits both in daily practices and in the case of concepts such as truth, but that those limits are elastic, they are different in each case and change over time. I would now go further by asking the question: Do the collections of the Galleries (Museums) of Fine Arts, the collections of the dead kept alive, indicate the limit to the de-totalizing of the grand narrative? Is it just the habit, or also the sense-rendering function of art itself, which puts up fierce resistance against the total dismantling of the grand narrative in those museums? I would tentatively answer the question in the affirmative, although I do not know why.

Notes

- 1 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Réponse à la question: qu'est-ce que le post-moderne?', *Critique* (April 1982): 357-67.
- 2 Michel Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce que les lumières?', Paris, 1984 ('What is Enlightenment?', in P. Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader*, New York, 1984, pp.32-50).